

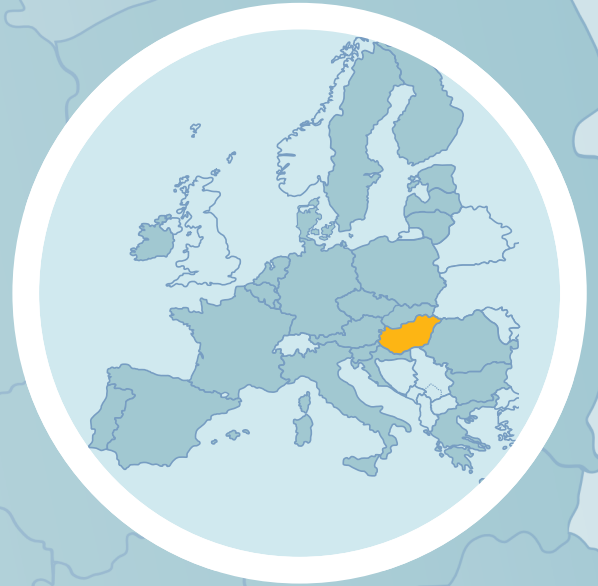
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WAHLMONITOR

*General Elections**Hungary*

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Election results

Hungary's elections on 12 April concluded with a historic record turnout of 79.52 %. With more than 5.8 million citizens out of 7.3 million registered eligible voters casting their ballots, this was clearly the highest turnout and level of voter participation in the country's post-1990 democratic history.

With almost 98 % of ballots counted, the opposition party Respect and Freedom ("Tisza"), led by Péter Magyar, secured an absolute majority – 53.29 % of the votes cast on party lists – and won 93 out of the 106 single-member districts. This resulted in a clear and stable two-thirds constitutional supermajority for Tisza Party (138 seats out of 199). Not only ousting the incumbent Fidesz, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, from power, but also opening the door to dismantling the system of state capture built during Orbán's 16-year-long illiberal and increasingly autocratic rule.

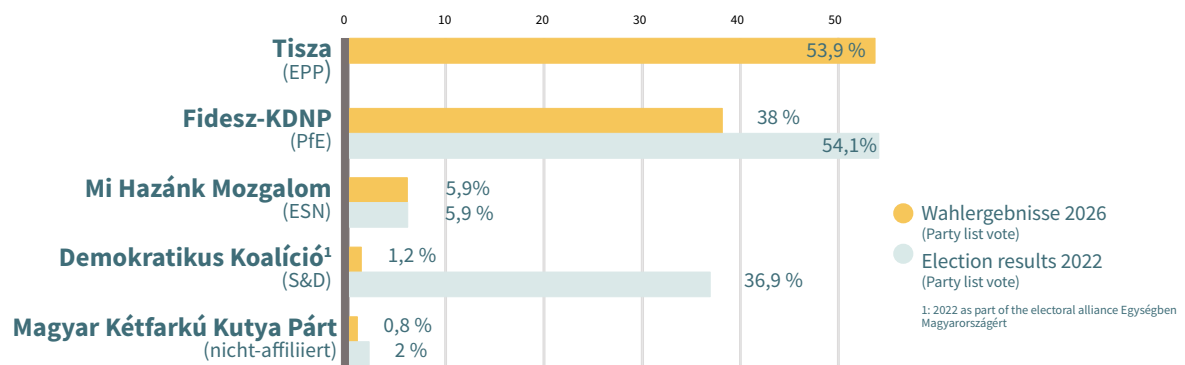
The record-high turnout and the solid supermajority provide extraordinarily robust democratic legitimacy for the new government, and together they have most likely

also contributed to the incumbent's recognition of the results, despite existing concerns about potential authoritarian escalation or a power grab.

The next Hungarian parliament will be a three-party legislature. In addition to Tisza Party and Fidesz (55 mandates), the far-right Our Homeland Movement ("Mi Hazánk Mozgalom") cleared the five percent threshold, resulting in six mandates for the party. The progressive left Democratic Coalition and the alternative protest Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party did not manage to clear the parliamentary threshold.

The results not only represent a landslide opposition victory but are also tantamount to a small democratic revolution. This outcome was enabled by a sudden and sustained shift in the electorate during the final month of the campaign, driven primarily by the rising possibility of change, as well as by two additional factors.

First, as correctly predicted in the pre-election analysis of Wahlmonitor, the majoritarian features of the electoral system benefited Tisza rather than Fidesz from the moment the former's electoral support overtook that of



the latter. At the same time, other features – such as gerrymandering – lost their effectiveness in parallel with the growing popularity of Tisza in rural and conservative areas.

Second, while the final days of the campaign were characterized by mutual allegations of electoral fraud and even the potential use of violence, the elections remained predominantly free, despite sporadic claims of vote buying and the organized bussing of voters. The main reason for this was less the democratic credentials of the incumbents than the vigilance of the opposition, civil society, and independent experts. Tisza Party deployed more than 20,000 partisan ballot counters and organized regional monitoring groups to report potential irregularities. In a nutshell, the opposition and independent civil society created effective checks and balances that helped safeguard the integrity of the election and prevented potential authoritarian manipulation.

Government formation

According to Hungary’s Basic Law, the newly elected parliament must be convened for its constitutive session within 30 days of the election. Given the majority, there is formally no obstacle to rapid government formation. However, for political reasons, President Tamás Sulyok may be interested in postponing the parliament’s constitutive session as much as possible and in protracting government formation to allow time for Fidesz stakeholders to carry out potential cover-ups.

The president’s stance may also be negatively affected by the fact that, in his victory speech, Péter Magyar called for his resignation after granting the mandate to form a government. However, the president is likely

only able to delay the process by one or two weeks at most, rather than derail it entirely.

Following successful government formation, Tisza Party has both the mandate and the legitimacy, by the virtue of its constitutional supermajority, to address Hungary’s system of state capture. In this spirit, Péter Magyar also called for the resignation of the President of the Constitutional Court, the President of Hungary’s Supreme Court (the Curia), the Prosecutor General, the President of the State Audit Office, the President of the National Competition Authority, and other captured state institutions. At the same time, he reiterated that joining the European Public Prosecutor’s Office and restoring Hungary as a constructive partner in Europe will remain top priorities for his government.

Implications for Europe

The Hungarian elections did not only result in a change of government; they amount to a regime change. They brought an abrupt democratic end to 16 years of autocratisation and to an illiberal regime. Orbán’s “illiberal democracy” has been widely seen, both in Europe and across the transatlantic space, as a functioning and viable blueprint for eroding democracy and securing the grip of illiberal, radical-right forces on power through an uneven political playing field and the hollowing out of political competition. This blueprint is now gone, providing both hope and impetus to strengthen the democratic integrity of the European Union and its member states. At the same time, the intensity of coordination among European and transatlantic radical-right forces may suffer from the loss of its main lynchpin, and some actors may even be forced to rethink their strategies in the aftermath of Hungary’s election night. International support and

endorsements en masse played a crucial role in Fidesz's election campaign. This suggests that the intensity of international cooperation on the far right does not necessarily strengthen, but may in fact weaken, their sovereigntist narrative and claims.

However, Hungary has not only been the vanguard of autocratisation in the EU over the past 16 years, but also a key spoiler of EU decision-making, particularly in the field of foreign and security policy since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The immediate consequence of the election will most likely be the end of Hungary's blockade and veto diplomacy. This may be particularly welcome news for Ukraine, in regard to the €90 billion financial assistance, as well as the start of accession negotiations in the "Fundamentals" cluster. The key question is when, not whether. Restoring Hungary as a trustworthy and constructive partner on the European stage will be the overarching strategic goal of the new government's foreign policy, while its output legitimacy will depend significantly on its ability to unlock frozen EU funds for

the country. This opens up space for a substantial amount of positive-sum, constructive engagement between Hungary and EU institutions, with EU partners well advised to seize this opportunity to both support and lock in the country's re-democratization process.

Finally, the impact of the Hungarian elections goes beyond the relationship between Budapest and its European partners and has genuinely European dimensions. It opens a 12-month period – lasting until the French presidential election – that provides a window of opportunity to implement much-needed reforms in EU decision-making and to make the Union's institutional architecture more resilient and functional in the event that a new illiberal challenger to integration emerges.

It would be a fatal mistake to conclude that, with regime change in Hungary, the EU can return to business as usual. Hungarian voters have provided 12 months of breathing space. Squandering it would amount to a historic failure of responsibility.

About the author

Daniel Hegedüs serves as Deputy Director for the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin. His research focuses on democratic and rule of law backsliding within the European Union, the intersection of autocratization and foreign policy, and the European and foreign affairs of the Visegrad countries. Daniel is the author of more than 80 academic and policy papers and is a frequent contributor to international media.

About Wahlmonitor

The IEP's Election Monitor tracks and analyses elections across Europe through factsheets, background information, short interviews and election analyses. In this way, the IEP promotes transnational debate on European policy issues.

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